Department of Human Services

Articles in Today's Clips

Wednesday, January 10, 2007

(Be sure to maximize your screen to read your clips)

Prepared by the
DHS Office of
Communications
(517) 373-7394

TOPIC	PAGE
*Child Abuse/Neglect/Protection	2-10
Health Care	11-17
Child Support	18-19
Adoption	20-23
Foster Care	24-25
Early Childhood Development	26-27
Homelessness	28
Utility Assistance	29
Minimum Wage	30-31

*Important story at this spot

Detroit Free Press
www.freep.com

Foster mom charged in tot's death

Boy and his sister were abused, prosecutor says

January 10, 2007

BY JACK KRESNAK and TINA LAM

FREE PRESS STAFF WRITERS

Manslaughter and child abuse charges filed Tuesday against a Detroit woman in the beating death of her 2-year-old foster child were the latest dramatic turn in a case exposing flaws in the state's child welfare system.

The Aug. 16 killing of Isaac Lethbridge, who was a state foster child for just 11 months, prompted the state to shut down all foster care and adoption services by the private agency that supervised the boy's care, the Lula Belle Stewart Center in Detroit.

Charlsie Adams-Rogers, 59, was charged Tuesday with involuntary manslaughter and two counts of second-degree child abuse in Isaac's death.

Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy said one child abuse charge relates to Isaac, and the other relates to his 4-year-old sister.

"I never touched that child. I did nothing wrong," Adams-Rogers said shortly before Detroit police took her from her home in northwest Detroit around noon Tuesday.

"It was my 12-year-old adopted daughter that did it," she said. "The police know she did it. She admitted it to them."

Worthy said she could not say exactly who beat Isaac to death.

"I'm not trying to be evasive, but there are other people that could be charged," she said at a news conference.

Worthy said there were nine to 12 people in the home at the time of Isaac's death, and that investigations by Detroit police homicide detectives and the state Department of Human Services continue.

Adams-Rogers was arraigned Tuesday evening in 36th District Court. Magistrate Charles Anderson III entered a not-guilty plea and set bond at $50,000.

Her attorney, Jeff McCarty, argued that she had a clean history in nine years as a foster mother and no criminal record.

"She cooperated fully with authorities," McCarty said. "This was an unintended death, and a tragedy." He said he suspects charges were brought against his client because "there is an insistence that some charges be leveled at someone."

Adams-Rogers, also known as Charlise Rogers, faces up to 15 years in prison if convicted of manslaughter. The child abuse charges carry penalties of up to 4 years in prison.

Wayne County Assistant Prosecutor Lisa Lindsey, the lead attorney on the case, said she had no comment on Adams-Rogers' statements about her daughter's possible role in Isaac's death. On Nov. 13, a juvenile court judge terminated Adams-Rogers' parental rights to the 12-year-old, who remains in the foster care system but has not been charged with a crime. The Free Press is not publishing her name because of her age.

According to statements and testimony at court hearings to terminate Adams-Rogers parental rights, the 12-year-old told investigators that she was playing with Isaac, throwing him onto a mattress, when he missed and hit the floor. A medical examiner testified that it was unlikely

such a fall could have fatally injured the boy.

Isaac died of multiple blunt-force injuries and had burns on his chest and abdomen and a broken right collarbone, according to the autopsy report.

Worthy said Isaac's 4-year-old sister had "multiple healing bruises on her back; she had abrasions on her buttocks, and she had lesions on both thighs." The Free Press is not publishing her name because of her age; she remains in foster care.

Both children were placed in Adams-Rogers' home last summer by the Lula Belle Center, a nonprofit foster care agency under contract with the state.

The DHS suspended Lula Belle's license as a child-placing agency within days of Isaac's death, after an investigation showed that the agency had lost track of several foster children and placed others in unlicensed homes.

Isaac's father, Matt Lethbridge, said he and his wife, Jennifer Lethbridge, were disappointed by the charges.

"The charges aren't as severe as we think they should be," he said.

Adams-Rogers is "ultimately responsible for Isaac, and his blood is on her hands," Lethbridge said.

Responding to Adams-Rogers' statement that her adopted daughter killed Isaac, Lethbridge said: "Her lies don't explain the torture our children suffered in her house."

The Lethbridges have filed a federal lawsuit against Lula Belle and workers there, claiming they failed to protect their children.

Calls to the Lula Belle Center and its attorney were not returned.

*Contact **JACK KRESNAK** at 313-223-4544 or jkresnak@freepress.com.*

Return to regular web page

detnews.com

This is a printer friendly version of an article from **The Detroit News**
To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

January 10, 2007

Foster mom charged with killing boy, 2

Suspect's lawyer claims she's a victim of the system; woman accused of manslaughter, abuse.

Ronald J. Hansen and Kim Kozlowski / The Detroit News

DETROIT -- A Detroit woman whose 2-year-old foster son was bruised and burned when he was found dead last summer was charged Tuesday with manslaughter and child abuse in the boy's slaying.

Isaac Lethbridge died in a home crowded with adults Aug. 16, 49 days after he and his 4-year-old sister were placed in the care of Charlise Adams-Rogers.

The boy's death remains under investigation and others who were at the home in the 18000 block of Greenlawn could still face charges, said Wayne County Prosecutor Kym Worthy.

Regardless, Adams-Rogers, 59, was responsible for Isaac's safety, Worthy said, explaining her decision to charge her with involuntary manslaughter and two counts of second-degree child abuse. Isaac's sister was found with lesions on her legs and fresh healing wounds on her back when authorities began their investigation.

"Whether we place our children in day care, latchkey care or foster care, we expect them to be safe and protected from danger," Worthy said. "This is something that every parent wants for their child."

Marc Shreeman, a Southfield attorney who represented her when her parental rights were terminated, called Adams-Rogers "a victim of the foster care system."

"We feel a need as society to point a finger, and she is the easy target," Shreeman said. "She did not harm those children. There is absolutely no evidence that Mrs. Rogers harmed anybody, let alone those two children."

One of Adams-Rogers' children told authorities she accidentally killed Isaac, Shreeman said.

Still, the felonies, which carry up to 23 years in prison, did not seem harsh enough for Isaac's father, Matt Lethbridge.

"His death ultimately was her responsibility," Lethbridge said. "Her statements that she didn't do it doesn't explain how Isaac got murdered and why Emma and Isaac were tortured in her home. She should have known."

Isaac had multiple wounds and second-degree burns on his upper chest, abdomen and behind his right ear at the time of his death.

Even before the charges, state authorities took action against Adams-Rogers and the Lula Belle Stewart Center in Detroit, which gave her custody of the children.

Emma was placed in a different foster home.

The state suspended the Lula Belle center's license Aug. 22, said Maureen Sorbet, a spokeswoman for the Michigan Department of Human Services. The center is appealing that decision in a hearing beginning Feb. 7.

Adams-Rogers lost her foster care license Oct. 6 and a judge terminated her parental rights to two adopted children, who are 12 and 2 years old.

Shreeman blamed the foster agency for failing to tell her or preparing her to meet the needs of her eldest adopted daughter, who was abused before she was adopted.

"The difference between getting a good worker at a good agency and a bad worker at a bad agency is obviously life-threatening," Shreeman said.

*You can reach Kim Kozlowski at (313) 222-2028 or **kkozlowski@detnews.com**.*

Return to regular web page

Return to regular web page

detnews.com

This is a printer friendly version of an article from **The Detroit News**
To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

January 10, 2007

Warren

'We were always scared'

Adoptive mother heads to trial after twin girls, 8, describe being burned, beaten and bathed in bleach.

George Hunter / The Detroit News

WARREN -- Eight-year-old twins testified in court Tuesday that their adoptive mother tortured them by denying them food, burning them with cigarettes, hitting them repeatedly with a belt, and immersing them in bleach.

After hearing the girls' graphic testimony during a preliminary examination in 37th District Court Tuesday, Judge Dawnn Gruenberg ruled there was enough evidence to bind over the case against the girls' adoptive mother, Tamika Williams, to trial.

Williams, 30, is charged with two counts of torture and two counts of child abuse. She is scheduled for an arraignment and preliminary examination Jan. 22 in Macomb Circuit Court.

"She always hit my sister and me," one of the girls testified. "She hit us on our stomach and back. We were always scared we were going to be hit for something."

At one point during the testimony, Assistant Prosecutor Jennifer Andary showed one of the girls a picture.

"What do you see in this picture?" Andary asked.

"Blood on the floor," the girl answered.

"Whose blood is it?" Andary asked.

"It's mine."

Williams was arrested Nov. 22, after a teacher at Warrendale Elementary School, where the girls were enrolled, noticed signs of abuse on the twins. The girls were removed from Williams' home, and have since been placed in a foster home.

One of the girls described being hung from a doorway and beaten.

"She hung me across the bedroom door with a belt, and she was hitting me with a bat on my legs and my stomach," the girl said.

The girls also said Williams often bathed them in bleach, denied them food, and repeatedly burned them with cigarettes.

"One time she made me get on the floor, and she was burning my neck," one of the girls testified.

Throughout Tuesday's proceedings, Williams, clad in a blue prison jump suit, smiled and shook her head as if to indicate the girls were not telling the truth.

Andary said prosecutors will look into whether to charge Williams' mother, because the girls also testified they were abused by the woman when they would stay at her house.

One of the sisters described a visit to Williams' mother's house: "She (the grandmother) showed us a picture of a man with his head cut off and she said she would do that to us."

The girls were scheduled to appear in court Dec. 19, but Andary said they were too frightened to testify in front of Williams and the rest of her family. On Tuesday, Williams' family members were barred from the courtroom.

"These are two brave little girls," Andary said.

"To be able to talk about what happened in front of the woman who did it to them took a lot of courage on their part."

Williams is being held on $1 million bond in the Macomb County Jail. She adopted the twins in 2005 from a foster care home in Southfield.

*You can reach George Hunter at (586) 468-7396 or **ghunter@detnews.com**.*

Return to regular web page

ClickOnDetroit.com

Woman Charged With Torture

Children Tell Judge Stories Of Alleged Abuse

UPDATED: 7:09 pm EST January 9, 2007

WARREN, Mich. -- A Warren woman accused of child abuse was charged with torture after facing a judge Tuesday.

In November, Tamika Williams, 30, was accused of beating and burning her twin 8-year-old girls.

The girls spoke out in court and told the judge Williams beat them with items such as an ashtray and exercise equipment.

Williams, who said she did nothing wrong, will be back in court on Jan. 22.

Previous Story:
- November 29, 2006: Foster Mother Accused Of Torture

Copyright 2007 by ClickOnDetroit.com. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.

The Macomb Daily
www.macombdaily.com

Adoptive mom beat girls with cord, bat, twins say

'She would bite us ... on the head,' one testifies

PUBLISHED: January 10, 2007

By Norb Franz
Macomb Daily Staff Writer

Two 8-year-old sisters testified Tuesday their adoptive mother repeatedly beat them with a cable cord, an ashtray, a baseball bat and an exercise device, and threatened to kill them if the twins told anybody about the alleged abuse.

"It was almost every day that she hit us because she hates us," one of the girls said of Tamika Shuntell Williams of Warren.

Williams, 30, faces two counts each of torture and first-degree child abuse for what law enforcement officials have described as one of the worst abuse cases they have handled.

Her adopted and physically scarred daughters, who were removed from their home by child welfare officials, separately detailed during Williams' preliminary examination in 37th District Court how they allegedly were abused. In soft, quiet voices, the girls said they feared her.

Both said Williams often struck them on their back, arms and head with a device that features a spring and is used for exercising abdominal muscles. The sisters described how one girl was tied to a bedroom door with her hands above her head and that the sister was bound to a bed.

They calmly explained other allegations: burns caused by cigarettes and a lighter; being struck with a belt; and having bleach poured into their bath so they wouldn't stink when they got out.

"She would bite us ... on the head," one of the 8-year-olds said.

The Macomb Daily is not publishing the names of the girls.

Asked by Macomb County assistant prosecutor Jennifer Andary why they did not tell anyone about the alleged abuse, both sisters said they feared greater harm.

"She said if we would tell anyone her business she would stab us," one girl said. Her sister testified Williams threatened to remove the twins from the home or "take us to the police station."

The twins said the adoptive mother showed them a photograph of a dead male -- one described him as an older boy and her sister claimed it was a headless corpse with the man's head placed on his chest -- and that she threatened to do the same to them.

Williams often shook her head in disbelief while listening to the testimony.

The defense did not call any witnesses during the proceeding, a probable-cause hearing to determine whether a crime was committed and if the evidence shows a defendant possibly committed the alleged illegal acts.

Judge Dawnn Gruenburg ordered Williams to stand trial in Macomb County Circuit Court. The Warren woman remains jailed in lieu of $1 million bond.

Outside the courtroom, defense attorney Ronald Goldstein said his client maintains her innocence.

"Wait for the trial," he told reporters. "We've got a lot of investigative work to do."

During a court hearing in December, the twins appeared afraid and were unable to testify. On Tuesday, Gruenburg prohibited any of Williams' relatives from sitting in the courtroom during the girls' testimony.

Andary, chief of the domestic violence unit at the Macomb County Prosecutor's Office, commended the twins for their bravery and accused Williams of "systematically" torturing them.

"Her conduct was brutal. It was inhumane," she said. "Instead of experiencing joy and laughter that 8-year-old girls experience every day, they had to experience anxiety and fear."

Williams' parents, Mitchell and Rose Lesuer, have described their daughter as a loving, single mom who adopted the girls on the day after Easter in 2005 because a medical condition prevents her from bearing children.

The abuse allegations came to light when the girls' former teachers at Warrendale Elementary School noticed marks on their arms. The girls have been placed in foster care and a different school.

The torture charge is one of the first of its kind filed in Michigan under a new state law that went into effect last spring. Punishable by up to life in prison, the offense is defined as inflicting great bodily injury or severe mental pain or suffering with the intent to cause "cruel or extreme physical or mental pain and suffering."
Click here to return to story:
http://www.macombdaily.com/stories/011007/loc_mom001.shtml

mlive.com
Everything Michigan

THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

Examiner looks for clues in child's death

Wednesday, January 10, 2007

By Theresa D. Mcclellan

The Grand Rapids Press

GRAND RAPIDS -- When Kent County Medical Examiner Stephen Cohle continues the investigation into the death of 6-year-old Cinceria Trevino, he will look at her brain for clues.

The developmentally disabled daughter of Isaac Trevino and Nicole Haugen died Sunday at the home of her father, where she was visiting for the weekend.

While her cause of death remains undetermined, Cohle said he will keep looking for answers. At the time of her death, she weighed just 30 pounds.

"This is a tough case. She's very small, way below the norm, but she's not a normal child. She's got brain damage. I want to see if this is some kind of family syndrome," Cohle said.

Isaac Trevino Sr., 27, has fathered five children -- including two with Haugen: Cinceria and 11-year-old Isaac Trevino Jr., who has cerebral palsy and mental health issues.

At least two of his other children have health issues, too, said Carol Bard, whose daughter, Misty, is married to Trevino. The couple's 8-year-old son has Rigors syndrome, is going blind in one eye and suffers from a form of autism, Bard said. The couple also has a 2-year-old son who has nose and ear problems, frequent respiratory infections and speech problems, the grandmother added.

"It's all heredity. Any child that Isaac has would have a disability," said Carol Bard, who cares for the 8-year-old.

Bard described Cinceria as a joy. "She was not verbal, but she would respond to touch, kisses and hugs," she said.

Family members said Cinceria's last few days were spent at her father's home in Southwest Grand Rapids, where family members watched movies and ate together. Cinceria ate through a feeding tube, and the family took her to restaurants with them when it was time for her feeding so she would not feel left out, relatives said.

"She always watched kids' movies. She would laugh and gurgle and make noises when something funny happened," said her 14-year-old stepbrother, Marquise Bard.

Cinceria, who attended Lincoln Developmental Center, suffered brain damage in infancy when her father accidentally rolled over on her while sleeping, smothering her. She used a wheelchair and could not dress herself, relatives said.

Two years later, in 2003, charges were brought against Trevino, who pleaded no contest to second-degree child abuse in what a judge called "a tragic accident." He served two years on probation.

Trevino's family has claimed the smothering did not cause Cinceria's medical problems, and that all his children had medical issues.

After Cinceria's death, Trevino and Haugen were in Kent County Family Court this week while authorities investigate whether there was any neglect in the girl's care. No charges have been filed.

mlive.com
Everything Michigan

THE BAY CITY TIMES

You can now get e-mail notification when a sex offender moves in

Wednesday, January 10, 2007

TIMES WRITER

Those who want to know when a sex offender moves into their neighborhood, near a school their child attends, or even into the area where their child attends college, can now sign up for e-mail notification from Michigan's Public Sex Offender Registry.

Anyone with an e-mail address can sign up for the service at www.mipsor.state.mi.us/ and be automatically notified when a registered sex offender moves into up to six zip code areas for which they have requested information.

The new notification service is offered by the Michigan State Police as part of the Sex Offender Registry and brings the state into compliance with Public Act 46, said Shanon Akans, a spokeswoman for the Michigan State Police.

The state had until Jan. 1 to have a form of public notification in place.

Akans said some other states have offered similar services and that Michigan has been criticized by some advocacy groups for not having a community notification in place.

The notification service is fully automated so that once it's set up, an employee does not have to be paid to comply with the notification law.

The system also is set up so that a person cannot sign another person up for notification without their knowledge, Akans said. The service has to be activated by the person who has the e-mail address.

The Sex Offender Registry, which always has provided addresses and, more recently, photographs of convicted sex offenders, also has been upgraded to give more information about each offender, such as their conviction.

And information about employees and students at all of Michigan's college campuses who are convicted sex offenders also can now be found on the Web site.

That information must be made available to the public as part of the Campus Crimes Act, a federal law that says post-secondary schools must keep track of and disclose information about all sex offenders to local law enforcement agencies.

Michigan's Public Sex Offender Registry has been online since 1999. As of November there were nearly 19,500 offenders listed there.

©2007 Bay City Times

© 2007 Michigan Live. All Rights Reserved.

mlive.com
Everything Michigan

KALAMAZOO GAZETTE

Meeting to look at maintaining MIChild program

Monday, January 10, 2007

By Linda S. Mah

lmah@kalamazoogazette.com 388-8546

Borgess Medical Center is hosting a town hall-style meeting Thursday to advocate for renewed funding for a low-cost health insurance program for children.

The meeting will be held at noon in Borgess' Lawrence Education Center auditorium. It will discuss the future of the MIChild program, a health-insurance program that provides medical, dental and mental-health services for children from birth to age 19 for a flat $5 monthly fee for qualifying families.

The event is free and open to the public. It will feature a live national satellite broadcast from Washington, D.C., followed by a panel discussion with Jane Williams, senior policy analyst for U.S. Representative Fred Upton; Janice Brown, superintendent of Kalamazoo Public Schools; Dale Hein, executive director of Kalamazoo County Health and Community Services Department; and Anthony King, chief executive officer for Family Health Center.

MIChild is a state-run program funded by the federal State Children's Health Insurance Program, which was launched in 1997 with $40 billion in funding. About 33,000 children are enrolled in MIChild, but state officials estimate 100,000 more children may qualify for the program.

Funding for the program expires this year.

To qualify for MIChild, a child must be under age 19, have no comprehensive health insurance and live in Michigan. Qualifying families must be at least 200 percent below the federal poverty level, which is an annual salary of $20,000 for a family of four.

To enroll in MIChild, families may call the Kalamazoo County Health Care Access and Outreach office at 373-5064 or the Department of Human Services at 337-4900. For information about the town hall meeting, call 226-5998.

©2007 Kalamazoo

© 2007 Michigan Live. All Rights Reserved.

The New York Times
nytimes.com

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT SPONSORED BY

January 10, 2007

Schwarzenegger's Plan for Universal Care Draws No Universal Agreement

By JESSE McKINLEY

SAN FRANCISCO, Jan. 9 — When Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger took the oath of office last Friday, he called on legislators in Sacramento to set aside party loyalty in favor of "the Party of California."

And sure enough, just 96 hours later, Democrats and Mr. Schwarzenegger's fellow Republicans are already in agreement: his first big idea of his second term — a sweeping plan unveiled Monday to assure health care to all Californians — is promising and ambitious, but faces a long, hard fight before enactment.

Chief among the challenges, politicians and policy analysts said Tuesday, is the enormous number of political players — from big labor and big insurance to small-county government — that would be affected by any universal health care bill.

"I cannot think of another topic that requires so many people to be heard to build consensus," said one Democratic lawmaker, Don Perata, Senate president pro tem. "You'd have to rent out Madison Square Garden to get them all in there."

Mr. Schwarzenegger's plan would extend care to the 6.5 million Californians who currently have no insurance, including an estimated one million illegal immigrants. That is just one of the elements to which Republicans are objecting.

"Health coverage for illegal aliens is a nonstarter for us," said Robert Huff, chairman of the Assembly's Republican caucus. "It creates a magnet for them coming here rather than staying there."

Like some Democrats, Mr. Huff was also skeptical about the plan's estimated cost, which the governor's office put at $12 billion a year. "I think it's just throwing a dart at the wall," he said. "It's anybody's guess what it would cost."

Then there is the financing, which among other things would require doctors and hospitals to pay 2 percent and 4 percent of their revenue, respectively, into a fund to cover the poor and uninsured. Mr. Schwarzenegger calls those payments a "fee," but other Republicans said that was just another word for "tax."

The California Medical Association, which represents more than 34,000 doctors in the state, gave the proposed overhaul mixed reviews. Though the association praised the idea of universal coverage, the fee on doctors could be a deal breaker.

"We feel it's a regressive tax," said Dr. Anmol Singh Mahal, the group's president.

The distinction between fee and tax is more than semantic: under California law, fees can be adopted by a simple majority vote of each house of the Legislature, while new taxes require a two-thirds majority. Democrats control both houses but do not have enough votes to muster two-thirds without Republican help.

Anticipating a raucous health-care debate in the Legislature this year, Mr. Schwarzenegger noted in his State of the State address on Tuesday night that proposals other than his had been advanced, and said that "they are all on the table."

Kim Belshé, the state's health and human services secretary, said the governor had expected people to disagree with elements of his plan.

"Health care reform is hard," Ms. Belshé said. "If these were issues that were easy to address and solve, they would have been addressed and resolved long ago."

Building consensus will be especially important for Mr. Schwarzenegger because of the referendum-addicted nature of California, where laws passed by the Legislature are sometimes overturned by ballot initiatives. In 2004, voters voided one ambitious health care law, the Health Insurance Act, which would have required medium- and large-size employers to offer care to their workers or pay a fee to the state.

Mr. Schwarzenegger's plan would employ similar "play or pay" mechanisms: employers with more than 10 workers would have to offer insurance or pay 4 percent of wages that are subject to Social Security tax into a fund subsidizing the purchase of health care for the uninsured.

Ms. Belshé said the state also expected to pay for the program in part through billions of federal dollars that California would get by increasing its Medi-Cal reimbursements to doctors and hospitals. The increase would automatically bring federal matching funds.

Such increased payments would be critical to health care providers, said C. Duane Dauner, the president of the California Hospital Association, because they would offset the new "fees" — or are they taxes? — the governor has proposed for doctors and hospitals.

Mr. Dauner said he thought the plan was "very innovative" but stood little chance of passing as is.

"I don't care what the plan is or who introduces it, whether it be the governor of California or the president of the United States," he said. "It goes through a process."

Carolyn Marshall contributed reporting.

Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company

-

The New York Times
nytimes.com

PRINTER-FRIENDLY FORMAT SPONSORED BY

January 10, 2007

Massachusetts Could Serve as a Guide in California's Health Insurance Bid

By PAM BELLUCK

BOSTON, Jan. 9 — In its drive to provide health insurance to nearly all its residents, Massachusetts has already signed up more than half of the poorest people who are eligible.

But experts and politicians agree that the bigger challenge will be the next 150,000 people: the working poor who will get a state-subsidized rate but will still have to pay for insurance, typically $18 to $170 a month depending on their income.

"This group is going to be much more challenging," said Paul Ginsburg, an economist who leads the Center for Studying Health System Change. "They're dealing with people who don't even think about having health insurance."

As California maps out its path to near-universal health insurance, Massachusetts could offer some guideposts.

"We're really changing the culture of providing heath care," said Michael J. Widmer, president of the Massachusetts Taxpayers Foundation, a nonpartisan group that studies state spending. "For some people, it's changing the mind-set from one of showing up at the emergency room or at the local health center with a problem to understanding that they can be insured. Nobody's expecting that would happen overnight."

Devising a plan that all of the state's political stakeholders could accept took hard work and time. It dates back to at least 2004, when Gov. Mitt Romney, a Republican and former venture capitalist, proposed requiring an "individual mandate" that everyone get insurance, a feature of the plan now being proposed in California. The president of the State Senate, Robert E. Travaglini, a Democrat, also called for expanded coverage, presenting a more incremental plan than Mr. Romney's.

Then the speaker of the House, Salvatore F. DiMasi, a more liberal Democrat, demanded an expansion of Medicaid and a payroll tax for employers who did not provide insurance. Those provisions were opposed to different degrees by Mr. Romney and Mr. Travaglini, and the legislation almost fell apart.

But several factors helped propel the parties to an agreement: a federal threat to cut $385 million in financing if the number of uninsured was not reduced and the support of Senator Edward M. Kennedy, a Democrat and rival of Mr. Romney.

The plan requires about 515,000 people, most of the state's uninsured, to get health insurance by July 1 or face penalties that could include the loss of a personal income tax deduction. Medicaid was expanded somewhat to pay for those below the poverty line. The state's $1 billion pool to pay for free care was reconfigured to be used for subsidized premiums for people earning up to three times the federal poverty limit.

The state will set rules to help insurance companies create health plans intended to be affordable enough for people with lower-

middle incomes.

So far, about 29,000 people at or below the poverty line have enrolled, or slightly more than half of those eligible for this type of enrollment.

The second phase, focusing on the working poor, began this month and is considered much more difficult.

The insurers selling the subsidized health plans have been trying to get the word out.

Christina Severin, executive director of Network Health, the insurer with most of the lowest-priced plans, said her company was advertising in several languages and enlisting hospitals, clinics and churches to recruit the uninsured.

The other major challenge will involve people not eligible for subsidized plans. First, the agency set up to put the law into effect, Commonwealth Connector, will have to set standards for affordable health care plans, deciding, for example, whether to require plans to include prescription coverage.

"On the one hand, there's pressure not to set the bar too low so it's not some sort of inadequate plan," Mr. Widmer said. "On the other hand, you need to have options because you're trying to draw in a lot of different groups.

Massachusetts is clearly breaking new ground, going further than other states.

Vermont's program, passed last May, will require private insurance companies to offer coverage for the uninsured starting in October 2007. To pay for the program, employers who do not offer health insurance will pay $365 per employee, and taxes on cigarettes will increase. Unlike Massachusetts, Vermont will not make participation mandatory.

Maine's program, Dirigo, which started two years ago, has run into several obstacles. Fewer than 20,000 people have been enrolled in the program; the goal was to cover all 130,000 of Maine's uninsured by 2009.

Business and insurance groups have sued over a provision that requires private insurers to pay. And a study group recently recommended considering individual mandates, requiring employers to provide coverage and imposing new taxes.

"Maine has had a fair amount of problems because it was based on a very questionable idea," Stuart H. Altman, a professor of health economics at Brandeis University, said, adding, "It's not going well."

Copyright 2007 The New York Times Company

Some states say new documentation requirements leave thousands without health coverage

KEVIN FREKING
Associated Press Writer

January 10, 2007

WASHINGTON — For several years, there has been a steady increase in the number of children enrolling in Virginia's health insurance program for the poor. Beginning July 1, state officials say, an unprecedented slide began.

Over the following five months, about 12,000 children dropped off the state's Medicaid rolls.

"An entire year's growth has been wiped out," said Cynthia Jones, chief deputy director for the state's Department of Medical Assistance Services.

The drop-off, Jones points out, began about the time a new federal law took effect. The law states that U.S. citizens applying for Medicaid or renewing their participation must present proof of their citizenship and identity. The law emerged out of concern that illegal immigrants were obtaining access to health insurance coverage sponsored by the government.

But some officials say that's not who is losing coverage.

Besides Virginia, some other states are also reporting declines in children enrolled in Medicaid or a decline in applications. They include Iowa, Louisiana, New Hampshire and Wisconsin. Health researchers say they don't know if the states are representative of a nationwide pattern.

The states singled out as experiencing enrollment declines were included in a report issued Tuesday by the Kaiser Family Foundation, which conducts health research, and by the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, a liberal think tank.

The states experiencing declines are adamant that U.S. citizens and certain legal immigrants are dropping off the Medicaid rolls, not illegal immigrants.

"There is no evidence that the decline is due to undocumented aliens leaving the program," said Anita Smith of the Iowa Department of Human Services. "Rather, we believe that these new requirements are keeping otherwise eligible citizens from receiving Medicaid because they cannot provide the documents required to prove their citizenship or identity."

Medicaid is a health insurance program serving about 55 million people that is financed by the federal government and the states. The declines cited would

indicate that just a fraction of the people enrolled in the program have dropped out as a result of the documentation requirements, but they do represent vulnerable populations, such as pregnant women and children.

"We've delayed coverage for those children, and if those children need medical care, there's going to be ramifications for them," said Donna Cohen Ross, outreach director for the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

But the agency that oversees Medicaid questioned claims that would link enrollment declines to the new documentation requirements.

"We believe we've given the states tools they need to both implement the law and provide sufficient flexibility to assist individuals in establishing their citizenship," said Jeff Nelligan, spokesman for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. "We continue to monitor state implementation and are not aware of any data that shows there are significant barriers to enrollment.

"If state are experience difficulties, they should bring them to our attention as we certainly want to understand why they are not using the flexibilities we have provided."

After Congress passed the documentation requirements, Medicaid officials released rules that established which documents would suffice in meeting the law.

Primary evidence, namely a U.S. passport or a certificate of U.S. citizenship, is considered the ideal. Secondary evidence or lower-tier evidence must be accompanied by a document showing identity. Such evidence includes birth certificates, insurance records, and as a last resort, written affidavits.

Original documents or copies certified by the issuing agency are required by the regulation. Copies are not acceptable. The federal government excluded millions of seniors and disabled people from the new documentation requirements. In December, Congress approved also approved an exception for foster children.

_____

On the Net:

Kaiser Family Foundation:

http://www.kff.org/medicaid/7533.cfm

Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services:

http://www.cms.hhs.gov

Today is: Wednesday January 10, 2007

The Daily Telegram

News

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Tuesday, January 9, 2007 9:15 AM EST

Just pay fair share

To the editor,

I want people to know just how much the Lenawee County court systems let people get away with in support issues.

I am a single mother trying to raise my two children by myself, and have been for at least five years now. My ex-husband has not paid me child support in five years. He was jailed once six years ago and had to pay a $500 bond — a slap on the wrist — and told to pay the support. Still he did not, and told his family that as long as he had to pay child support he would never work again.

He filed his taxes once in the last five years and I received that, a whole $200. After that I never received anything again. Then last week he was arrested, given the option of paying money to get out of jail or spending 30 days in jail. Guess what? He took the jail time. So once again he gets a slap on the wrist and in 30 days he gets to walk again and not help pay for our children.

He is $42,000 behind. Why isn't the system doing something about this? Why is it the sole responsibility of the mother to have to provide for the children. My children have gone without a lot of things in their lives because I

just cannot afford the sports or the extracurricular activities they deserve. Constantly I tell the kids “I’m sorry, I just can’t afford that.”

Please let me be heard and maybe then someone will help the single mothers instead of letting these deadbeat dads get away with not helping. Why should the children suffer? They didn’t ask to be brought into this world.

And the funny part is the fathers who do pay, they are harder on and make it so they can’t afford to stay working. And all mine has to pay is $85 a week for two children. To me that is fair. That is all it takes to raise two children so I don’t want half his paycheck. I just want enough to help raise them with. This 55 percent of pay to me isn’t fair. Go by what it actually costs to raise children and stop trying to live off other people’s money. That isn’t fair.

I’ve raised my children alone and I know it doesn’t cost more than that to provide for children. I’m not trying to live off my ex’s income. I just want enough to help raise them. After all I helped make them so it should be 50/50. Thanks for listening.

Jennifer Clark

Everything Jersey

The Star-Ledger

N.J. adoption growth exceeds expectations

Child welfare workers and judges credited with turnaround at DYFS over the last year

Wednesday, January 10, 2007

BY SUSAN K. LIVIO
Star-Ledger Staff

The number of adoptions from foster care rebounded late last year after an 18-month downturn, exceeding a goal set by a federal monitor last summer.

Children and Families Commis sioner Kevin Ryan said yesterday that a push by child welfare workers and judges succeeded in matching 1,361 children with families during 2006.

That was 24 percent more than the target agreed to last July by the state and Children's Rights Inc., a national child advocacy group which sued New Jersey to improve its beleaguered child wel fare system.

Gov. Jon Corzine praised the achievement in his State of the State address yesterday. "After years of failure and sometimes tragic results in our child welfare system, structural reform and new investments have put us on track to protect thousands of at-risk children," Corzine said.

Children's Rights had been critical of how Ryan's predecessor, James Davy, revamped adoption practices in 2004 and 2005 by clos ing the specialized adoption offices at the Division of Youth and Family Services before devising a new means to track and complete adoptions.

Before the changes, New Jersey's adoption system earned consecutive million-dollar-plus bonuses from the federal government in 2001, 2002 and 2003 for its suc cess rate, and set a state record for completing 1,418 adoptions in 2004.

Then adoptions fell more than 7 percent to 1,315 in 2005, the year the new procedures were first im plemented. By mid 2006, adoptions had dropped another 16 percent.

DYFS officials began re-consti tuting specialized adoption offices and adoption teams. They focused on whittling down a backlog of 1,700 children waiting to be matched with families or waiting for DYFS to complete required background investigations on families who pledged to adopt them.

"We set targets office by office, and worked with managers," Ryan said.

By the end of the year, adoptions rose and the backlog dropped to 1,597 children's cases, DYFS Di rector Eileen Crummy said.

"This shows that it can be done, with competent management, continuing oversight and pressure through the settlement agreement," Children's Rights Associate Director Susan Lambiase said yesterday.

Cecilia Zalkind, executive direc tor of the advocacy group, the Association for Children of New Jersey, credited the state for focusing on the problem, and judges, especially in Union and Essex counties for "putting pressure" on DYFS to move the cases through faster.

DYFS Director Eileen Crummy agreed. "Judges worked with us and really pushed us to make sure we were moving."

The rise in adoptions "suggests we can fix this," Ryan said. "We worked hard and I am proud of the staff, but we still have a lot of work to do."

Ryan is releasing data today that will provide a snapshot of how child welfare reform is going some 3 1/2

years after the state settled a class-action lawsuit with Children's Rights and committed to a court-monitored overhaul of the child welfare system. He said the final adoption figure for last year may exceed what he released yesterday after final number-crunching was finished last night.

There are about 11,000 children in New Jersey living in foster homes, group homes and residential centers. Additionally, DYFS monitors 43,000 other children who live with their families.

Susan K. Livio may be reached at slivio@starledger.com or (609) 989-0802.

© 2007 The Star Ledger

© 2007 NJ.com All Rights Reserved.

Newsday.com

News | Entertainment | Sports | Jobs | Cars | Real Estate | Apartments | ShopLocal | Place An Ad am New York

DYFS exceeds federal mandate on foster child adoptions

By ANGELA DELLI SANTI
Associated Press Writer

January 9, 2007, 7:14 PM EST

TRENTON, N.J. -- After heading into the second half of 2006 with a record number of foster children waiting to be adopted, the state child welfare agency ended the year with hundreds more children in adoptive homes than the number required by a federal monitor.

Some 1,361 children in state custody were adopted last year, exceeding by 261 the target of 1,100 adoptions set by a federal judge overseeing the revamping of the state Division of Youth and Family Services.

"We worked very hard this year," Children and Families Commissioner Kevin Ryan said. "This is a sign we're on the right track in reforming our child welfare system."

Gov. Jon S. Corzine in Tuesday's State of the State speech lauded child welfare officials for increasing the number of adoptions of foster children "by 124 percent above our plans."

"After years of failure and sometimes tragic results in our child welfare system, structural reform and new investments have put us on a track to protect thousands of at-risk children," Corzine said. "We licensed more foster homes, trained more caseworkers and reduced turnover."

The adoption numbers are a rare success for DYFS, the agency once so dysfunctional it was sued by a child advocacy group to force reforms and placed under court supervision.

The agency could be released from court oversight in 2010 if it meets all of its obligations. Those include reducing the number of abused and neglected children in state custody, reducing workers' caseloads and placing more sets of siblings in the same foster home.

The number of foster children waiting to be adopted climbed to a record high in the first six months of last year despite a new state program that was supposed to find them permanent homes faster than before.

Just 588 adoptions were finalized during that time, according to the agency, as 1,747 children who were available for adoption waited.

Child welfare officials retooled the system, creating a specialized work force to focus on adoptions, devoting directors to manage adoptions and developing targets for moving children to permanent homes, said Eileen Crummy, director of DYFS' Office of Children's Services.

Cecilia Zalkind, executive director of the New Jersey Association of Children, a child advocacy group, said the numbers "reflect a commitment to re-establishing the adoption program, which was destroyed in the originally settlement agreement."

She said the state has been clearing "a huge backlog" of children for whom parental rights had been terminated but adoptions had not been finalized or adoptive families had not yet been found.

Ryan said the number of adoptions for 2006 is still being counted and could grow. Under terms of a settlement with Children's Rights Inc., the advocacy group that sued the state to

force child welfare system reforms, DYFS was to complete 1,100 adoptions in 2006 and 1,400 adoptions this year.

Some 1,900 foster children awaited adoption on Dec. 31, down from 2,154 on June 30, the agency said.

There were 1,315 adoptions of children in foster care in 2005 and 1,418 in 2004, according to figures supplied by Ryan.

Despite the emphasis on finalizing adoptions, Ryan said the screening process has not been hurried or compromised.

Copyright 2007 Newsday Inc.

This is a printer friendly version of an article from **Lansing State Journal**. To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

Published January 10, 2007

Benefit aims to help stricken foster mom

Cancer patient's medical coverage about to expire

Related news from the Web

Latest headlines by topic:

- Cancer
- Health
- Medicine

Powered by Topix.net

By Hugh Leach
Lansing State Journal

Many of the hundreds of people whose lives Judy Ridge has enriched over the years are now hoping to help save hers.

Ridge, 60, known as "Grandma Judy" to more than 60 foster children she has cared for over the past 12 years, is in a tough battle with cancer, and her medical insurance is due to expire early next month.

Although the initial prognosis was not encouraging, the Cancer Treatment Centers of America in Zion, Ill., has given her hope.

But the treatment and related costs will be expensive.

"If we can't come up with the money my mom is going to die," said Nikki Mesko, one of Ridge's three daughters, who is organizing a Friday benefit to help with the medical costs.

Ridge, who lives in Lansing but is staying with relatives in Charlotte while she prepares for the cancer treatments, knows the battle will be tough.

"But I'm a fighter," she said. "I'm not going to give up."

Ridge - who has worked for 7-Eleven for several years, the past five at the store at Haslett and Okemos roads - has brightened the lives of countless customers and co-workers.

"She is very friendly; very nice," said Mary Korrey, an employee at the Capelli Oggi Hair Salon located in the same strip mall as the 7-Eleven. "All of us here got to know her and like her."

"She seemed to know everybody who came in," fellow employee Morgan Muscato said. "She is really amiable."

Max and Norma Wolf, who stop by the Haslett 7-Eleven each morning for coffee, said Ridge started off their day on the right note with a friendly greeting and a smile.

Over the years they began to share personal stories during visits to the store and the Wolfs heard all about Ridge's foster children.

"We came to know her as a very special person," Norma Wolf said.

Once she got to know a customer, Ridge said, she loves to joke and have fun with them.

"I love my job," she said, although she had to take leave in November when her cancer was diagnosed.

Mesko said her mother is a tireless worker who never worked fewer than two jobs even while taking care of as many as six foster children at a time.

Those children included some with special problems, including at least one baby born addicted to crack cocaine.

The adoptive parents of some of Ridge's former foster children plan to bring them to the benefit Friday.

"I'm really looking forward to seeing them again," said Ridge, who plans to be there, at least for a time.

Ridge's sister-in-law, Cindy Webb, with whom Ridge is staying, said friends have come to Charlotte from Lansing and as far away as Florida and Texas to visit her.

Despite her illness, Ridge helps out with Webb's day-care center as much as possible.

"She's like a mother to everybody," Webb said.

Contact Hugh Leach at 377-1119 or hleach@lsj.com.

Copyright 2007 Lansing State Journal Use of this site signifies your agreement to the
Terms of Service (updated August 2006)

[Back]

The Daily Mining Gazette - Published: Tuesday, January 09, 2007

BHK offers wide range of child-oriented help

CAPTION: **Garrett Neese / Daily Mining Gazette**

Lily Stoor paints a "dinosaur bone" in a preschool class.

By GARRETT NEESE, DMG Writer

HOUGHTON — From infants to parents, BHK Child Development has a hand in improving many lives throughout the three-county area.

Its programs provide services for more than 1,500 children at 18 facilities throughout Baraga, Houghton and Keweenaw counties.

Money for the programs comes from 17 different funding sources. However, BHK Executive Director Rod Liimatainen said, the agency works to streamline what can be a labyrinth of federal requirements in order to provide parents an easy path to service.

"We're trying to describe our programs in more general terms and be inclusive and seamless in the delivery of services to our community," he said.

In the process, BHK partners with a variety of community groups, including local school districts, Western U.P. District Health Department and the Keweenaw Family Resource Center.

BHK's history began in 1967, when the Baraga, Houghton and Keweenaw Community Action Agency started offering Project Head Start in Houghton County.

Liimatainen, who had operated first the summer and then the fall program, became executive director of the new expanded agency, making him the longest-serving Head Start director in Michigan's history.

Head Start still makes up the largest part of BHK's work. But there are numerous other programs offered.

Superior Americorps, meanwhile, has placed 57 members at schools and human service agencies in seven counties in the Western U.P. Great Explorations, which began in 2004, offers a variety of afterschool and summer educational programs to students at five area schools.

For parents, there's programs such as Even Start, which helps mothers-to-be or those with a child

up to eight years old get a GED or high school diploma. Soon, a new program will offer services and classes for area fathers.

Competition with other child-care groups for children and funding has spurred innovation, Liimatainen said.

Some of that's come in making do with less.

BHK's operated for six years without a funding increase from the state (they're now at $3,300 per student). The $7.4 million budget is also about a million less than it was four years ago.

Part of those savings come from using school facilities. Other ways include energy conservation, as well as shutting down smaller and less efficient centers in Aura and Pelkie and transporting the children to centers elsewhere.

In other instances, teachers visit houses directly instead of the intermediary workers who might have gone in the past, which can allow for a better connection between the teacher and the parents.

Parents have noticed the service. In its most recent parent satisfaction survey, 97 percent of BHK parents said they were happy. The fact that more than half of the parents returned the survey also shows the level of parent involvement, Liimatainen said.

"Parents are our customers, and they're also the ones who can measure the quality of our program as it impacts their children," he said.

That impact, Liimatainen said, can be measured in areas as diverse as speech, social skills, self-esteem and motor skills.

"Coming in, children are healthier and smarter than the average child ... leaving they're even healthier and smarter," he said.

Parents also have some oversight of BHK through the Parent Council, which oversees BHK along with the Child Development board.

Teri Braun, who handles early childhood special education services with the CCISD, said BHK has had "major impact" on the area.

"They've provided an oppportunity for the children to come and participate in their program, made accomodations and worked with the school district," she said.

She also praised BHK for their work with the district.

"It's a very collaborative effort, and it's something you don't have in other districts," she said, adding that BHK had been the envy of other programs at conferences she'd been to.

"This is what people have been trying to do. This is the ideal."

Garrett Neese can be reached at **gneese@mininggazette.com**

Return to regular web page

detnews.com

This is a printer friendly version of an article from **The Detroit News**
To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

January 10, 2007

Homeless may get relief

Chesterfield military homes may become shelters or a new library

Robert Snell / The Detroit News

CHESTERFIELD TOWNSHIP -- Macomb County's growing homeless community -- particularly women, children and young adults -- could have a new home if part of a 103-acre military housing base is converted into temporary living quarters.

Three agencies -- Macomb Homeless Coalition, Family Youth Interventions and Perfecting Community Development Corp. -- plus World Wide Crusade for Christ, could learn as early as next month if there is opposition to their plans to convert several Sebille Manor military houses into homeless shelters. The township's library and parks and recreation departments also are interested in the land for a new library and a park.

The housing complex, located on Sugarbush near Cotton, is part of the Selfridge U.S. Army Garrison that was closed in 2005.

The proposals are a response to a widening gulf between the number of homeless people and the number of shelter beds in Macomb County and across Metro Detroit. If approved, the portion that's set aside as a youth shelter, for adults ages 18-24, would be the only such housing in Macomb County.

Opinions are split on whether it's best to isolate homeless people or integrate them into a community.

"There is a stark need right now, and given the lack of capacity, I don't want to say any practical approach should be dismissed -- but I think (isolating) stigmatizes people," said Marc Craig, president of the Community Housing Network, a Troy-based group that assists people with disabilities.

Jimetta Lewis, executive director of the Macomb County Rotating Emergency Shelter Team, said she thinks the military housing is a "fantastic opportunity."

"There are a lot of youths that are couch surfing, that have no place to go, that age out of foster care and end up homeless," she said. At stake is the future of a large chunk of land in one of the fastest-growing communities. For more than 50 years, military personnel from nearby Selfridge Air National Guard Base, Port Huron and Metro Detroit lived in the one-story homes.

The Army, with help from the Department of Housing and Urban Development, will decide the land's future use. The government is required to consider agencies that serve the homeless first.

The agencies' plans involve providing homes for about 50 people in six duplexes, two single-family homes and two attached-housing units.

A public hearing hasn't been scheduled, but could be held as early as next month, said Mark O'Brien, director of the Chesterfield Township Local Redevelopment Authority. The government could make a decision on the land's use by next January after township officials weigh in with a recommendation on the land's use.

Though Macomb County leads the region in growth, it also has a growing homeless problem. Thirteen of the county's 27 communities saw their poverty ranks grow from 1990 to 2000 while five stayed the same, according to the U.S. Census.

A sluggish economy, soaring numbers of people losing homes to foreclosure and a lack of affordable low-income housing fueled the homeless increase, advocates said. The median home value in Macomb County is $139,200 in 2000, according to Southeast Michigan Council of Governments.

There is a shortage of beds at a time when shelters are seeing more first-time homeless people, said Carrie Fortune, a coalition coordinator.

Officials in Macomb County and Detroit will take a head count Jan. 25. Oakland County officials will count their homeless Jan. 24. Officials in all three Metro counties expect higher numbers due to economic conditions and a more comprehensive count.

*You can reach Robert Snell at (313) 222-2028 or **rsnell@detnews.com**.*

Return to regular web page

Everything Michigan

THE GRAND RAPIDS PRESS

Residents get help

Wednesday, January 10, 2007

GRAND RAPIDS -- Help now is available for city water and sewer customers who fall behind on their bills. City commissioners on Tuesday approved a new "circuit breaker" program that sets aside $116,000 to help residential customers who are at or below 200 percent of the poverty level. The program will be administered through the four community centers operated by the Area Community Service Employment Training Council. The assistance also is available to suburban customers of the Grand Rapids water and sewer system.

©2007 Grand Rapids Press

© 2007 Michigan Live. All Rights Reserved.

ClickOnDetroit.com

House Democrats Push To Increase Minimum Wage

POSTED: 7:56 am EST January 10, 2007
UPDATED: 12:03 pm EST January 10, 2007

RELATED TO STORY

SURVEY

Should the federal minimum wage be raised from $5.15 an hour?

- Yes, by a lot.
- Yes, by a little.
- No, it should not.
- No, it should be eliminated entirely.

Vote

Results | Disclaimer

CAPITOL HILL -- Tackling a top priority, House Democrats pushed a $2.10 an hour increase in the federal minimum wage toward passage Wednesday, calling it only a partial restoration of purchasing power for America's lowest-paid workers.

As their second bill since taking control of Congress, the Democratic-written legislation would raise the federal wage floor from $5.15 to $7.25 an hour in three steps over 26 months. The federal wage hasn't budged for 10 years.

House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer, D-Md., said passing the boost "is simply a matter of doing what's right, what's just, and what's fair."

"If the minimum wage had been adjusted with the cost of living on an annual basis since 1968, a minimum wage worker would not be making $5.15, not be making $7.25, would be making $9.05," he said.

Organized labor and other supporters pitched the bill as coming to the aid of the working poor. Business groups and other opponents said it could lead to higher prices for goods and services, force small companies to pink-slip existing workers or hire fewer new ones, and crimp profits.

"In America we can either have maximum opportunity or we can have minimum wages. We cannot have both," said Rep. Jeb Hensarling, R-Texas.

The bill would raise the wage floor in three steps. It would go to $5.85 an hour 60 days after signed into law by the president, to $6.55 an hour a year later, and to $7.25 an hour a year after that.

"For 10 years the lowest-paid Americans have been frozen out. They have been working at a federal poverty wage, not a federal minimum wage," said Rep. George Miller, D-Calif., author of the legislation.

President George W. Bush said he supports a wage boost paired with "targeted tax and regulatory relief" to help businesses -- which would have to pay for the higher labor costs -- stay competitive. As currently written, the House bill doesn't include any such tax or regulatory breaks.

House Democrats are denying Republicans any chance to amend the minimum wage bill. Rep. Howard McKeon, R-Calif., complained that constituted a "a series of colossal missed opportunities"

The Senate is expected to move quickly -- perhaps in the next few weeks -- on a similar bill. Business groups and some Republican lawmakers, however, hope they will be able to get some business-friendly provisions into the Senate package.

The last time the federal minimum wage rose was in 1997. That's the longest stretch without an increase since the minimum wage was established in 1938. Inflation has eroded the minimum wage's buying power to the lowest level in about 50 years.

The Labor Department says 479,000 workers paid by the hour earned exactly $5.15 in 2005, the most recent estimate available.

The federal minimum wage is like a national wage floor, though some people can be paid less under certain circumstances. States can set minimum wages above the federal level; more than two dozen states plus the District of Columbia do.

People who are paid the minimum wage tend to be young -- under age 25 -- never married, more likely to be a woman, a minority and work part time, according to a recent analysis of 2005 data by the Labor Department.

If the federal wage does rise in 26 months to $7.25 an hour, about 5.6 million people -- 4 percent of the work force -- who make less than this would be directly affected, according to the Economic Policy Institute, a liberal leaning group. The group estimates that another 7.4 million workers would benefit indirectly as raising the floor would ripple through the work force.

That means higher payroll costs for employers.

"It is an economic reality that if the federal minimum wage increases by 41 percent, it will put upward pressure on all labor costs for small businesses, which continue to be the engine of economic growth in the United States," the National Retail Federation complained in a letter Tuesday to House Speaker Nancy Pelosi of California.

The retail group expressed concern about the "lack of balance" in the House bill because it doesn't include other provisions to help ease the economic impact on companies.

Many businesses want the pot sweetened, perhaps by faster depreciation or other tax breaks or letting small businesses band together to buy health insurance for their workers.

But AFL-CIO President John Sweeney shot back saying: "An increase in pay for America's lowest-paid workers should not have to depend on additional payoffs to business."

Both the House and Senate minimum wage bills also would extend the minimum wage -- on a separate time table -- to employers on the Northern Mariana Islands, a U.S. territory.

Recent attempts to boost the federal minimum wage had failed when Republicans had control of Congress. But prospects changed after the Nov. 7 midterm elections put Democrats in charge in both the House and Senate.

Copyright 2007 by The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.